

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

The Dramatic Impact of Sputnik

A Telegram from the Ambassador in Moscow (Thomson) to Secretary Dulles, November 16, 1957

Embassy believes Sputnik undoubtedly source pride to all elements Soviet society particularly intelligentsia. Regime attempt to equate communism and progress enhanced and its prestige probably raised, while disquiet certain professional and intellectual groups perhaps somewhat mollified. Although military angles not focus of principal stress, national sense of security also probably increased. However, Embassy contacts, though limited, indicate ordinary citizens remain more interested in bread and butter measures. Moreover, Zhukov ouster and way it was handled probably vitiated in short run some psychological advantages of Sputnik and pointed up gap between arbitrary and antiquated political system and ultra-modern technological achievements.

Finally Sputnik not unalloyed gain for intelligentsia, since though already high status of science boosted further, there are indications regime may seek use Sputnik success to demand greater exertions for comparable triumphs in other fields. In bloc, Soviets are obviously using Sputnik as symbol of growth Soviet power which should be proof to peoples of bloc that communism is irreversible. Hopes for liberation which already dimmed by passage of time in general and by Hungary in particular presumably will be further reduced. Repeated demands by Khrushchev (who will now seem to be leading from own "position of strength") that West recognize status quo in Europe will have some effect even if West maintains silence or gives verbal refusal.

On basis apparent Soviet analysis of new international opportunities now open to USSR, Embassy believes Dept. estimate fails give sufficiently high rating to impact, especially in uncommitted areas, of present situation. This is one in which the USSR, after giving general impression of parity with US in nuclear field, has gone on dramatically to take stance of world leader in

vitaly important and imagination-catching field of future like rocketry, leaving US in position of catching up in science and technology which hitherto assumed US strong point. Embassy agrees that US launching satellite and ICBM might lessen impact, but there is no reason expect USSR rest on present laurels and meanwhile USSR has gone long way to establish picture of itself (which it is assiduously promoting) as world power on par with and conceivably superior to US. In this connection, Sputniks have given much greater retroactive impact to ICBM announcement, a fact acknowledged but also underplayed in estimate.

Immediate consequences appear to be Soviet effort to inflate pressure for big power talks, and possibly increased Soviet belief that US and West ready or can be forced discuss disarmament on Soviet terms, admit Soviet role in Near East, and accept postwar Communist conquests in Eastern Europe and Far East. Moreover, since USSR is combining its greatly increased prestige and enhanced political stature with continued foreign assistance program in key uncommitted areas, it can be expected that tendency to accept Soviet help and expanded trade (with all possibilities of penetration thus implied) will grow as target nations feel need accommodation with Soviets, as well as real domestic pressures for industrialization— especially if US programs should become inadequate. With regard to section roman numeral IV B 7 and 8, it is true that Sputnik-ICBM does not increase danger of devastation threatening US friends which already huge, but its importance still great since for first time it brings into question US superiority or even certain parity *vis-à-vis* Soviet power on which these nations had been relying as shield.

THOMPSON

Source

United States Department of State, Office of the Historian,
Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume XXIV,
Soviet Union, Eastern Mediterranean, Document 88

<http://www.history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v24/d88>